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ABSTRACT

A major area of concern in divorced families is compliance with child support payments. Aspects of the former spouse relationship that are predictive of compliance with court-ordered payment of child support were investigated in a sample of 58 divorced persons all of whom either paid or received child support. Structured interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data on attachment, co-parental communication, perception of dyadic satisfaction during marriage, demographic information, payment of support, preferred relationship with former spouse, and interpersonal relationship of former spouses. A covariance structure model consisting of two exogenous latent variables (attachment, desired involvement with former spouse) predicting one endogenous latent variable (compliance), was developed and tested. The results indicated that attachment to one's former spouse was a significant positive predictor of compliance. Desired involvement with one's former spouse was also a positive predictor, but was not statistically significant. (NRB)

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CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENT:

A STRUCTURAL MODEL OF PREDICTIVE VARIABLES

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Child support payment:

A structural model of predictive variables

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to investigate aspects of the former spouse relationship that are predictive of compliance with court ordered payment of child support. Particular attention was paid to attachment and desired involvement with one's former spouse as they related to compliance. A model developed using the maximum-likelihood methods of LISREL suggests that attachment to one's former spouse is a significant positive predictor of compliance. Desired involvement is also a positive predictor, but was not statistically significant.

Child support payment: A structural model of predictive variables

Historically divorce has been viewed as the "breaking up" or ending of a family. However, it is increasingly recognized that rather than dissolving a family, divorce reorganizes it (Price-Bonham & Balswick, 1980) into a bi-nuclear structure (Ahrons, 1979). The key to understanding the bi-nuclear family is to examine the former spouse relationship (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1976; Wallerstein & Kelly, 1975).

A major area of concern in bi-nuclear families is compliance with child support awards. The severity of this personal and societal problem is well documented. For example, the U.S. Bureau of the Census (1978) reported that only one half of the children who were to receive child support received it as decreed. Twenty-five percent of these children received less than the specified amount and the remaining 25% percent received no decreed support at all.

Other documentation of the high rate of non-compliance with decreed child support awards includes Weitzman's (1981) research in which only one-third of her sample of women who were divorced less than one year reported regularly receiving the full amount of decreed child support (43% percent of the women in this study reported receiving sporadic support and 23% reported problems in obtaining the set amount on time). Other studies (e.g., Cassety, 1978; Jones, Gordon, & Sawhill, 1976; Sorenson & McDonald, 1982) suggest that only 10 to 35% of women decreed by courts to receive child support payment actually do. In contrast, Tropf (1980)

reported 79% of men in his study claimed to have not missed one payment of support.

Even allowing for inaccuracy of the self-reports in these studies, the statistics on default of child support are alarming. The effect on women when they do not receive support for their children is magnified by consistent findings that their financial situation generally deteriorates after divorce while that of their former spouses may improve (Albrecht, 1980; Weitzman, 1981). Some authors suggest that the explanation for high rates of default lies in the lack of effective enforcement (Weitzman, 1981). That is, if stricter enforcement were in effect, men would not defy the court's orders.

Although this may be true, concentrating on enforcement fails to consider any underlying interpersonal or emotional factors that may make some men resistant to maintaining child support. Literature addressing these factors is extremely limited. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to investigate the relation between former-spouse relationships and compliance with decreed child support awards.

Unfortunately, most of the research examining issues of compliance or non-compliance with child support awards has been at the macro level. These studies ignore such factors as the dynamics between the former spouses although that relationship may have a greater influence on compliance than ability to pay (Brown & Fox, 1979). For example, failure to maintain child support payments could be one means through which fathers express the degree and type of involvement they desire with their former

spouses. Failure to pay may be representative of a distancing mechanism used by fathers who have not adjusted to their divorces and, therefore, avoid actual as well as symbolic contact.

Also, although child support is intended to support one's children, it is the mother who directly bears the burden when it is not paid. Consequently, default can be a way of expressing outrage towards the mother because a man perceives that he must provide support while having decreased chances for custody or say about how his children are reared. Or more simply, it may be a way of showing resentment towards her for desiring an end to the marriage. That is, failure to maintain payments may be a means of punishing one's former wife for a variety of reasons.

Another concept that may be relevant here is that of attachment between former spouses. Attachment theory has its origins in describing parent-child relationships (Bowlby, 1975) but has been used to describe the former spouse relationship (Brown, Felton, Whiteman, & Manela, 1980; Kitson, 1982, Weiss, 1975). The use of this theory is due to similarities that researchers of divorce have observed between behaviors of divorced persons and those of children separated from their parents.

Data on post-divorce attachment show that 40 to 70% of divorced couples indicated at least mild attachment to their former spouse (Brown, et al., 1980; Kitson, 1982; Spanier & Casto, 1979). Kitson's data (1982) did not reveal significant differences in attachment by sex nor recency of divorce, and Goldsmith's study (1980) found no significant difference in attachment, hostility, caring, and guilt between male and female former spouses. Similarly, Hetherington, et al. (1976) described

former spouses as having difficulty altering long standing interaction patterns; two-thirds of the former spouse interactions in their study were a continuation of previously existing conflicts. The quantity and quality of these post-divorce attachment behaviors are thought to be related to the existence of children, financial obligations, love, hate, mutual friendships, business matters, dependence, moral obligations, or habit (Krantzler, 1973; Weiss, 1975, 1976).

Thus far, most research on post-divorce attachment has examined its negative or painful aspects. Such attachment may not, however, be a liability or something to be eliminated. The continuance of the family as a bi-nuclear unit may even necessitate a certain degree of attachment between former spouses. The important factor in this post-divorce attachment is not its degree but, rather, how it is manifested. For example, fathers who have close relationships with their children after divorce have former spouses who feel positive toward them and facilitate visits (Daniel, 1978). This suggests that acknowledgment of post-divorce attachments and its appropriate expression may be a valuable asset to the functioning of the post-divorce family. In particular, acknowledgement of post-divorce attachment may be a factor increasing the likelihood that child support payments will be made regularly and on time.

In summary, the data currently available consistently indicate that men suffer less financially after a divorce but often do not fulfill financial obligations to their children. Also, it has been demonstrated that the relationship between former

spouses continues after they are divorced and that the continuation is stronger for those who have children. Finally, it is suggested that post-divorce attachment between former spouses is a factor that contributes to payment of child support.

METHOD

Sample

The sample for this study is purposive, consisting of 58 divorced persons all of whom either pay or receive child support. The 19 men and 39 women respondents resided in the South and Midwest and were part of a larger study of former spouse relationships. The mean age for the men was 42.7 years (R = 24-60, S.D. = 8.4) whereas for the women it was 37.9 years (R = 23-56, S.D. = 7.1). The sample was well educated with men reporting a mean of 15.3 yearsl of education (R = 12-20, S.D. = 2.6) and women reporting 14.8 years (R = 12-20, S.D. = 2.6).

Approximately 95% of both the men and women were presently employed with 15.7% of the men and 10.5% of the women reporting second jobs. The men in the sample had a mean income in the $20-$25,000 range (R = $10,000 to $50,000, S.D. = $9,000), whereas women reported mean incomes in the $10-$15,000 range (R= $0 to $35,000, S.D. = $5500). It is of interest to note that no woman reported an income greater than $35,000, while 10.6% of the men reported incomes above this level, 5.3% of these men having incomes in the $45-$50,000 range. Reported incomes are gross incomes, exclusive of receiving or paying child support or alimony.

The mean length of marriage for the men was 14.4 years (R = 2.3 - 23.3, S.D. = 6.5) while for women it was 12.4 years (R =

0.5-23.7, S.D. = 6.5). Men reported an average of 2.5 children (R = 1-6, S.D. = 1.5) and women reported an average of 2.1 children (R = 1-6, S.D. = 1.0).

Procedure

Names of respondents were obtained from court records and through two large organizations of divorced persons. Data were collected using structured interviews and questionnaires. Attachment was measured using two of Kitson's (1982) sub-scales, Attachment and Reluctance and Pressure to Divorce. Co-parental communication was measured using Goldsmith's (1980) Co-parental Relationship Scale. Respondents' perceptions of the degree of dyadic satisfaction during their marriage was determined by a past-tense modification of Spanier's (1976) "Dyadic Adjustment Scales." Finally, in addition to demographic information, details were obtained regarding (a) payment of support, (b) the type of relationship respondents preferred to have with their former spouse, and (c) a series of questions designed to address the interpersonal relationship of former spouses. Factor analysis of the last series of questions produced a scale that measured perceived honesty of one's former spouse.

The Research Model

A covariance structure model was developed and tested in this study. The model (Figure 1) consists of two exogenous latent variables, attachment and desired involvement, predictiving one endogenous latent variable, called compliance. The measured variables used to indicate the first latent variable, attachment, are attachment, reluctance and pressure to divorce,

and dyadic satisfaction. The measured variables of perceived honesty of former spouse, co-parental communication, and type of relationship desired are used to indicate the second latent variable, desired involvement. Compliance, is indicated by a measured response assessing timely payment of child support. The model also includes measurement error for all observed variables and the structural equations.

--- Figure 1 about here ---

Within this model it is hypothesized that compliance will be positively predicted by both attachment between spouses and a desire to remain involved with each other. It is further expected that there will be a correlation between the two latent variables, attachment and desired involvement, but that it will be in the low-to-moderate range.

Analysis

Various methods exist for the analysis of covariance structure models (Long, 1983). Joreskog and Sorbom's LISREL (1981) is one method used increasingly in the field of family studies (e.g., Thomson & Williams, 1982; Roosa, Fitzgerald, & Carlson, 1982). LISREL offers the researcher a means of analyzing multivariate data using combinations of a measurement model (i.e., factor analysis) and a structural model (i.e., path analysis). An important advantage of this approach is the ability to use information concerning the relations between all of the variables to solve for parameters.

Solving for the parameters in a model is essentially a process of solving for unknowns in a system of linear equations comprised of both known and unknown elements. Sometimes the

structure of a model results in an infinite number of solutions for some or all unknowns. Occasionally, a finite number of non-unique solutions are obtained. Either of these situations makes any interpretation of the model meaningless. Meaningful models occur only when unique solutions are obtainable for all unknowns, that is, when the model is identified. When a model is not identified, it must be modified in a way that insures identification. Consequently, verifying that a model is identified is a crucial step in the formation of any multivariate structure. A full discussion of identification is beyond the scope of this paper but the process is one of meeting several conditions (Long, 1983).

The first condition is necessary but not sufficient. It requires that the number of parameters to be estimated be less than the number of unique elements in the covariance matrix of observed variables. The model used here meets this condition. Joreskog and Sorbom (1981) discuss a second necessary condition whereby one verifies that the information matrix calculated by the program is positive definite. If this is not the case the program indicates which parameters may not be identified. Although the model used here meets this condition, Long (1983) does not recommend reliance on this method since it is not a sufficient condition.

A neccessary and sufficient condition is that each parameter can be identified in terms of the variances and covariances of observed or identified variables. These covariance equations may have very complex solutions but they need not be actually solved

using numerical values (Joreskog & Sorbom, 1981). What is important is that the researcher be certain that any given parameter can be solved for in terms of known parameters.

Long (1983) describes this process in detail. It is a tedious one that is begun by writing all of the equations for the model in terms of the variances and covariances of the observed variables. Next, any terms within these equations that violate either the assumptions of the LISREL model (e.g., no covariance between error terms and latent variables) or the constraints of the model should be eliminated. Finally, an effort is made to express each unknown parameter in terms of known parameters. As parameters are identified, they can be used in identifying remaining unknowns. When all unknowns can be expressed in terms of knowns, the model meets the necessary and sufficient conditions of identification.

If the model is not identified additional constraints can be made within the model to eliminate unidentified parameters. This might include, for example, removing an unidentified parameter or constraining it to be equal to an identified parameter. As with other aspects of the LISREL approach any modification to the model should have a substantive foundation. All parameters within the model discussed in this paper meet the necessary and sufficient conditions described above. With that assurance, the model can be estimated with LISREL and its fit can be examined.

A likelihood-ratio, similar to the chi-square test, is used to test the fit between the covariance structure of the observed variables and the covariance structure of the hypothesized model. In this test the null hypothesis, H_0, states that the covariance

structure of the observed variables is created by the model, rather than the alternative hypothesis, H_1, that states that there is no restricted relation among the variables. The goal is to verify that there is no significant difference between the actual covariance matrix of the observed variables and the covariance matrix that is "re-created" based on parameter estimates calculated by the program. Therefore, failure to reject H_0 (i.e, small values of chi-square compared to the degrees of freedom) supports the validity of the model.

The value of the likelihood-test, however, depends on sample size; therefore, LISREL provides additional means of evaluating a model. First, one must consider the values obtained for the estimated parameters. Theoretically inappropriate values or directions of influence should be considered suspect and indicative of misspecification of the model. One should also examine the differences between the covariance matrix of the observed variables and that created from the program's estimates of parameters. To assist in this, LISREL provides a matrix of residuals, a plot of normalized residuals and indices indicating where the model might best be modified for a better fit. Throughout the analysis of any model, substantive considerations continue to be of great importance. One must attempt to balance theory with information contained in the statistical analysis.

Results

The chi-square test for this model reveals a value of 16.14 (p=0.185) with 12 degrees of freedom for a x^2/df ratio of 1.34. Using the chi-square test, H_0 cannot be rejected and the model

can be demonstrated as adequately fitting the data. This is supported by a goodness of fit index of 0.904, where 1.000 indicates perfect fit. Similarly, examination of the residuals, their q-plot, and the modification indices did not reveal any misspecification of a substantive nature. LISREL, then, indicates that this model has a moderate fit to the observed data.

With the knowledge that the model has a good fit to the data from this sample, we may proceed to discuss it in more detail (Table 1 presents standardized and unstandardized effect coefficients for the model with t-values). The measurement portion of the model indicates that attachment, reluctance and pressure to divorce, and perception of dyadic satisfaction with the marriage are significant indicators of attachment. Desired involvement with former spouse is significantly indicated by perception of former spouses' honesty, level of co-parental communication, and type of relationship preferred. In an early computer run, gender and time since divorce were included in the model as indicators of both attachment and desired involvement. Neither of these parameters were significant, however, so they were dropped from the model. Perceived honesty of one's former spouse is a strong indicator of type of desired involvement, while reluctance and pressure to divorce is a strong indicator of attachment.

--- Table 1 about here ---

Compliance is most strongly affected by attachment (0.569, $p \leq 0.05$). As attachment increases so does compliance. The effect of type of involvement desired on compliance is less strong (0.478) and not quite statistically significant. The effect is, however, in the positive direction, showing that the more desire

there is for involvement the higher the rate of compliance.

The total coefficient of determination, a generalized indicator of reliability for the whole measurement model is 0.993. We can conclude from this that the indicators jointly serve very well as measurement instruments for the two exogenous latent variables, accounting for about 99% of the variance. The values for the error parameters of several of the observed variables suggest that a good deal of their variance is accounted for by factors outside of this model. Unfortunately, as previously discussed, the small sample size prohibited the inclusion of extra variables that would, undoubtedly, increase the model's explanatory power.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study examined the relation of former spouse attachment, desired involvement with former spouse and compliance with court ordered payment of child support. It was hypothesized that attachment between former spouses and the type of relationship desired with ones former spouse would positively predict payment of court ordered child support. The results of testing the hypothesized model suggests that attachment is a moderate predictor of payment of child support but desired type of involvement may not be.

Dyadic satisfaction during marriage, reluctance and pressure to divorce, and attachemnt were all significant indicators of the latent variable attachemnt. This suggests that men who were more satisfied with their previous marriages, who were reluctant for it to end, and who continue to feel attached to their former

wives, may have a stronger desire to be financially supportive of their children regardless of the current structure of the family. Regardless of the form of the family, if their attachment were low, their caring for the welfare of their former spouse and children would be low as well.

Despite the lack of significance for desired involvement as a predictor of child support payment, the findings of the study are suggestive of the relation between the two variables. Honesty, co-parental communication between former spouses, and type of relationship preferred are all significant indicators of desired involvement. It appears that when there is honesty between former partners and they maintain communication between each other concerning the children, child supprt is more likey to be paid.

It might be asked why a man's attachment to his children is not included in the model. Obviously, the measurement of this variable and its inclusion would make for a better model. There is, however, one important point to consider in this. Even though child support is intended to support children, it is paid to the mother rather than, for example, placed in a trust fund. Because of this, father's concern for their children's welfare may be superseded by their feelings about their former spouse, especially if those feelings are negative. Future studies examining payment of child support must attempt to clarify how a man's feelings for his former wife and children differ, and what effect these have on payment of child support.

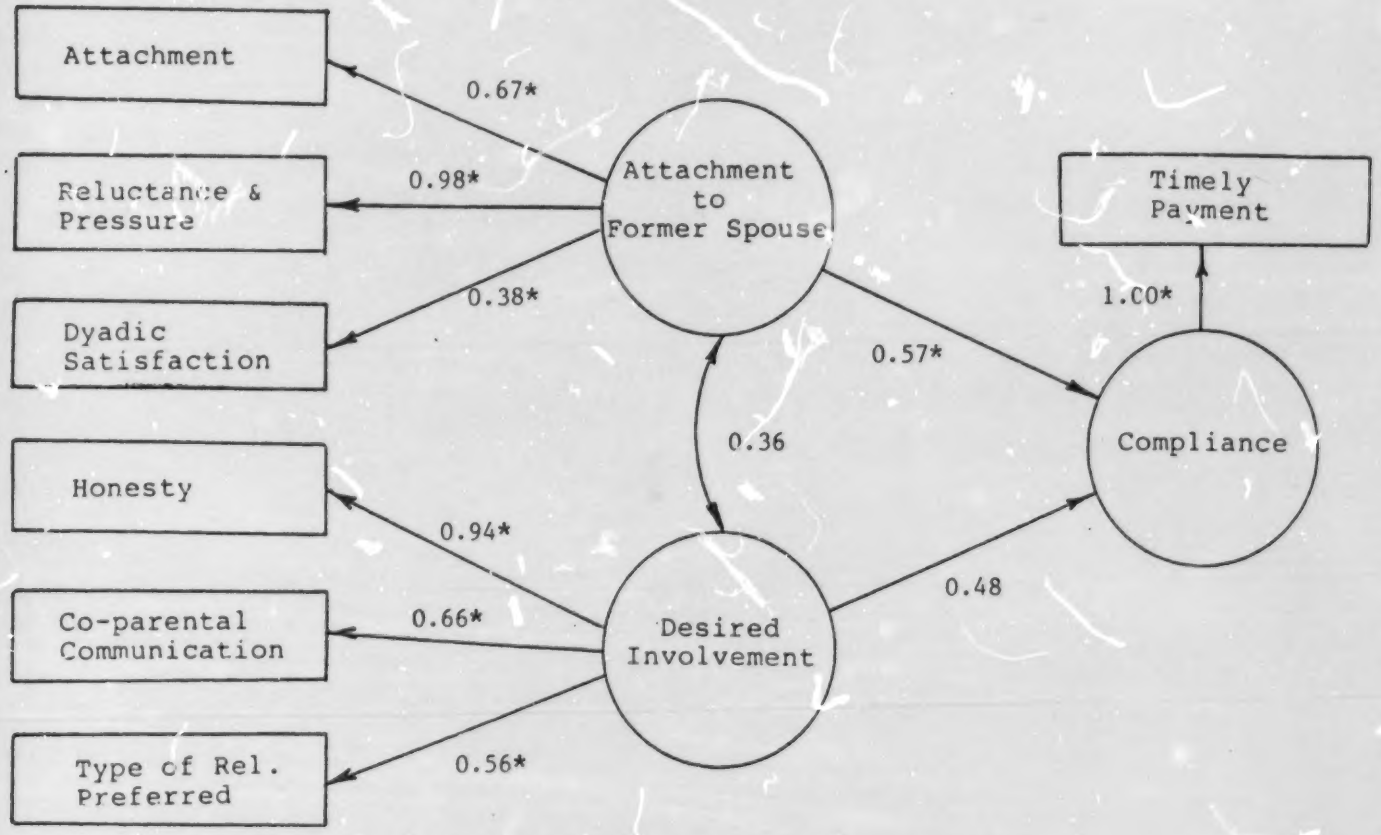
Obviously, the small sample size of the study is a major limitation in both the richness of the model and its generaliza-

bility. Despite this limitation, this study has important implications deserving further investigation. First, to understand fully and, consequently, to solve the problem of non-payment of court decreed child support, the dynamics of post-divorce family relationships must be more closely examined. Secondly, research examining post-divorce attachment might be enhanced by examining the change in quality of attachment rather than its quantity. A certain level of attachment may be quite desirable or even necessary between former spouses if they are to co-parent children effectively.

FOOTNOTE

1. The question concerning education was coded as follows: 1-6 years for elementary school; 7-12 years for high school; 13-16 years for college or trade school; and 17-20+ years for graduate or professional school.

FIGURE 1. MODEL OF ATTACHMENT TO FORMER SPOUSE AND DESIRED INVOLVEMENT WITH FORMER SPOUSE AS PREDICTORS OF COMPLIANCE WITH CHILD SUPPORT PAYMENT.



* indicates parameters significant at the p≤.05 level.

TABLE 1. STANDARDIZED AND UNSTANDARDIZED PARAMETER ESTIMATES FOR INDICATOR VARIABLES OF THE TWO EXOGENOUS LATENT VARIABLES

	Standardized	Unstandardized	T-value[a]
Attachment			
Attachment	0.67	1.00	*
Reluctance & Pressure	0.98	1.46	3.94
Dyadic Satisfaction	0.38	0.57	2.75
Desired Involvement			
Honesty	0.94	1.67	3.66
Co-parental communication	0.66	1.18	3.76
Type of relationship preferred	0.56	1.000	*

[a]If greater than or equal to +2.0, $p<.05$ (Duncan, 1975; Wheaton, Muthen, Alwin & Summers, 1977)

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